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A BUSINESS MAN'S VIEW OF CHILD LABOR¹

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It is supposed that the question of child labor has been fully discussed from the ethical standpoint, and that all are agreed that it is harmful to the mental and physical growth of the child, and also hurtful to the state to place a child at work at an age under fourteen. I shall, therefore, try to discuss the question from the practical standpoint of the business men.

In the complex interests of business as conducted to-day, there is opportunity for the employment of many children under sixteen years of age. To complement this, the conditions rendering it necessary for many children to seek some gainful occupation, at an early age, are so many and so varied, that lest it may be thought a simple matter of law-making, let us look at some known conditions which confront us in every-day life in business affairs.

From a somewhat long experience, the following conditions have constantly appeared:

Even with both parents living, lack of employment by the breadwinner of the family may make it necessary for the child to make some contribution weekly to the family support.

Again, the father dying, the mother is often compelled to use every means to supplement her own earnings in order to support the family and keep younger brothers and sisters at school for a year or two more.

Or, both parents being dead, the child is often thrown into the custody of the nearest of kin, who themselves are not able to support him, and must, from force of circumstances, place him in some employment.

Under these conditions it would seem that they were a law

¹Address at the third session of the Second Annual Meeting of the National Child Labor Committee, Washington, December 9, 1905.

unto themselves, and provided the child is in good physical condition, the chances are that there will be no great harm done.

However, a thoughtful consideration shows the very great difficulty in dealing with the situation, as these children constitute a large proportion of the applications for employment in mercantile lines. These conditions existing, thousands of children drift into gainful occupation, either wisely or unwisely, and thus become a factor in social, economic, and business life. Some of the broadest-minded merchants, in order to remedy the recognized inconsistency of the situation (not to say evil), and having in their employ many children under sixteen, deprived of opportunity hitherto, have opened schools of instruction in their establishments, giving the boys two hours' instruction in the early morning in elementary education. This, however, is exceptional and can only reach a limited number; but is nevertheless a move in the right direction, and proves in itself that a better education is needful for promotion and advancement. It may be stated as a safe proposition that for every dollar earned by a child under fourteen years of age ten-fold will be taken from their earning capacity in later years. Lest it be said the statement is too strong, the writer hastens to say that he is perfectly familiar with instances, from Alexander Hamilton to Andrew Carnegie, and many others of personal knowledge, who were compelled to begin life's work at the age of thirteen, and whose success would seem to disprove the statement. One of the most successful merchants in Boston to-day was forced at nine years of age, on account of his father's death, to assist a widowed mother in the support of three younger children.

But exceptions only prove the rule, and it is only necessary to point to the large number of children under sixteen years of age who, for greater or less misdemeanors, have become public charges upon the State, and are compelled, a few years later, to go into life's work with not only little education to help them, but an experience which will tend to degrade them, to show the necessity for wise legislation in the matter.

The present prosperity of business interests in our country has brought about a condition of affairs which must count for much in the future welfare of the children of to-day. For the past five years, the average wage earner has had perhaps more steady, con-

tinued employment than in any previous five years of this generation. A consequence of this is, that in looking to the future welfare of his children he very properly and wisely decides that he can afford to send the boy or girl to school for one, two, or three years longer, knowing that by this course he is doing all that lies in his power to prepare him for usefulness. This action is felt in all business interests and has very noticeably reduced the number of applications from the families composing the better class of wage-earners. It will result in giving the children of to-day an opportunity for such education and equipment as will tend to make them more self-respecting and better citizens. It is an encouraging feature of the present situation.

Since the province of the State is to legislate for the greatest good of *all* its citizens, it would seem that the highest wisdom would be to place an age limit by written law, below which children ought not be placed in gainful occupations, and this age may possibly be best fixed at fourteen years.

It may be interesting to know that the unwritten law is also quite effective in this particular, viz.: that there do not appear at the present time any children between the ages of eleven and fourteen, the average child seeming to pass from the age of eleven to fourteen without due regard to the Gregorian calendar.

While in Washington we have peculiar conditions, in that we are not a manufacturing or commercial city, we fully sympathize with the views of those advocating child labor laws in mining and manufacturing communities, and shall be glad to be placed in the columns of States favoring advanced laws for the protection of the youth of both sexes.